

Charles Pinckney's Republicanism

Pinckney was the founder of the Jeffersonian Republican Party in South Carolina and upheld its principles for almost 30 years. When two national political parties were formed in the 1790s on the basis of the opposing ideas of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, two members of President George Washington's cabinet, Charles Pinckney moved into the Jeffersonian Republican camp. Republican philosophy was grounded in confidence in majority rule, suspicion of Britain, and commitment to American agrarianism, the promotion of individual liberties, and opportunities for advancement. Pinckney's consistent support for free public education exemplified his Republican principles. While most of the South Carolina Lowcountry aristocracy, including his second cousin Charles Cotesworth Pinckney and Thomas Pinckney, were staunch Federalists, Pinckney allied himself with the upcountry farmers and planters, who were overwhelmingly Republican.

In 1800, as state party leader, Pinckney directed Thomas Jefferson's successful presidential campaign in South Carolina. His reward was appointment as United States Minister to Spain. Pinckney served in Madrid from 1801 to 1805, during a period of conflict between France and its ally, Spain, and much of the rest of Europe. Pinckney was unable to obtain West Florida from the Spanish government, which was angry over France's 1803 decision to sell Louisiana to the United States just 3 years after Spain was forced to cede that territory to France.

After Pinckney's return to South Carolina in 1806, he increasingly emphasized the protection of southern interests and states rights. In contrast to his outlook in the 1780s, when he saw chaos looming as a result of the weakness of the Federal Government, Pinckney sought in later years to restrain the Federal Government from unwarranted interference with the states. He especially feared the northern commercial and financial interests would dominate the national government to the detriment of the South, whose economy depended on agriculture and slavery. Pinckney's views foreshadowed those of John C. Calhoun and others who would assert the right of a state to nullify a national law or secede from the Union. These differences between the North and South and the breakdown of the Nation's political system resulted in the Civil War.

Pinckney's last major speech, delivered in the U.S. Congress in 1820, was a passionate defense of the balance of sectional interests embodied in the Constitution that he helped draft.